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ABSTRACT

Since 1979, New York State has been working on an instrument to evaluate elementary school students' writing ability. Several thousand writing samples were obtained and were analyzed, by a test development committee consisting of elementary school teachers, qualitatively within each grade as high, average, and low, and in terms of organization and sentence construction, cohesion, vocabulary and spelling. Using these data, five categories of writing types that students in grade 5 could handle were developed. By the spring of 1982, the steering committee for the Elementary Writing Test had prepared 36 pretest items and criteria for rating the papers holistically. Ten test forms were field tested throughout the state. In the spring of 1983, the test will be administered to all students in grade 5. It will require two writing samples from each student. By this time, all fifth grade teachers will have been trained to rate student papers. Further study will be carried on during the first year of the test's administration. Use of this test will emphasize the importance of writing throughout the elementary grades, promote movement toward an articulated kindergarten through grade 12 writing program, and increase teacher and administrator awareness of the writing process. (Includes charts on criteria and score discrepancy resolution.) (JL)

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THE WRITING TEST FOR NEW YORK STATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

DEVELOPMENT, FORM, IMPLICATIONS

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December 9, 1982

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THE WRITING TEST FOR NEW YORK STATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:

DEVELOPMENT, FORM, IMPLICATIONS

Development of the Test

An effective writing program encompasses grades K-12, and an effective assessment of the student writer must also evaluate the student's written product at various points on that educational continuum. In its effort to upgrade students' writing skills, New York State has had a writing test for secondary students since 1979. Work has continued since then to develop an assessment instrument to evaluate students' writing ability at the elementary school level.

We realized and you must realize that not a great deal of work had been done with writing and its assessment, particularly with young children in the 70's; therefore, the Department brought the question of the assessment of writing skills to its National Advisory Panel which had been formed to focus on the development of the test to be used at the secondary level. When questioned as to what should be expected of elementary students, the response in general was to contact Dr. Donald Graves who was doing work at the time with elementary students and their ability to write.

Dr. Graves of the University of New Hampshire met with the Steering Committee for Test Development -- a committee which consists of representatives from the various school types found in the state. In addition, he worked for part of the day with the staff of the Bureau of English Education and Bureau of Test Development. Dr. Graves' advice to us included the direction that we needed to see what students could write at various grade levels. This advice was not easy to follow in 1979, because we must remember that in 1979, at least in our state, not many teachers nor school districts were keeping samples of what students write. There was little or no attempt made to keep such samples over a span of years or grade levels.

The Bureau was fortunate however in its ability to obtain writing samples which represented students in grades 1 through 12. A language arts supervisor and her staff had accumulated such data from a writing project which had been funded through Title IV-C. As a result, we had student writing samples for three specific topics from every grade level. The sample from this small city included approximately 5,000 papers written by students from the grade levels indicated.

In February 1980, two consultants with Bureau staff reviewed these papers. The review focused primarily on papers written by students in grades 4, 5, and 6, although papers over the complete spectrum were compared. From this review, we determined the following.

Often we hear that young children can not write (not heard as much in 1982 as it was in 1979) more than one or two words, that is unless they are a part of a specific project which does encourage and focus on the production of writing. If any fact emerged from the reading of these papers, it was the fact that very young children can indeed produce a significant amount of written words. This can be done even when the writing task is given under test-like conditions.

In Grade 2, we saw that children could generate ten sentences or more including factual material organized into paragraphs. These children describe, can choose words

to show sense responses, can explain, can absorb a dramatic work and relate it, and can attempt to follow the conventions of language. (For a more detailed account see Chew, C. R., "The Second Grade Student As Writer," English Language Arts Bulletin. Fall/Winter Volume 21, 1980.)

In Grade 3 we saw that children could generate more writing, expand a topic with their own knowledge, blend and distinguish reality and fantasy, use repetition, and develop a clear sense of the use of language and its conventions -- parentheses, direct quotations, appositives, introductory subordinate clauses, and connectives other than "and," to name a few. (See Chew, C. R. "The Third Grade Writer," The English Record. Fall 1980.)

In Grade 4, we saw that children could handle dialogue between two characters, arrange ideas (least important to the most important), divide a topic into two parts and discuss each part with five or six related ideas, begin to use third person narrative, begin to gain more control over mechanics, use transitions, use story conventions, incorporate tone, and become aware of audience.

In Grade 5, we saw the children begin to look at topic complexity and to cover many facets of it, start to work in different modes to find different approaches to a topic, summarize and emphasize, say a lot about a given topic and gain a greater control over handwriting, paragraphing, length, and neatness.

We became increasingly aware that papers written in the fall -- the early part of the school year -- were always poorer than the papers written in the late spring. This was true at every grade level. Writers appeared to have a definite loss of writing skill over the summer months, and one wonders if lack of practice --time on task -- is enough to explain the step backwards on the part of the writer.

Another observation that we made was that only in one or two instances was what the student wanted to communicate not understandable. In addition, the readers could see in the product of the early writer many of the skills which could be developed and would be used as the writer moved through school. The seeds of persuasion, explanation, and narration are there, even in the youngest writer.

We became increasingly aware of the role of topic in eliciting a response from the student. The students' senses seemed to be asleep as they responded to some of these topics. They used description minimally even when writing about very familiar experiences and activities.

As you would suspect, some of the best responses came when students wrote about a personal experience which was not far removed from them in time. When students wrote about things that happened in class, an experience which had just been completed, or about something they dealt with on a daily basis, the results were much better than when they projected into the future or wrote about something with which they had no direct relationship.

Students had enough difficulty in writing about their own lives and experiences, facets of which they may have been just becoming aware of or were trying to understand. To require them to conjure up a land of make believe may not call forth the best type of writing. In fact when older students wrote on such topics, they often resorted to a rehash of familiar TV or film story lines.

In addition, we concluded from this review that we did not have enough samples, the samples were not written by students from a wide ability range, and topics had not elicited the variety of writing types which we felt it necessary to examine. As a result, three additional topics were devised in order to collect a wider sample of student papers in order to address the needs stated above. Papers written for these three topics were collected and an additional 3,000 papers were written by students in grades 4, 5, and 6.

A test development committee which consisted of elementary teachers was formed in the summer 1980, and from October to December of 1980, this committee analyzed the results of this sampling.

As this committee reviewed the papers written for these three tasks, it examined the student papers in a number of ways. Papers for each task at each grade level were grouped qualitatively in groups of high, average, and low. Papers within each of these groupings were analyzed in relation to organization and sentence construction, cohesion, vocabulary and spelling, plus mechanics or the conventions of language.

Most of the papers considered to be examples of the best writing at each grade level evidenced a pattern of organization. Most contained an introduction but the conclusion or the attempt to bring closure to the piece of writing was not as prevalent in even the best of papers. Even the youngest students correctly used paragraphing.

The best papers adhered to the topic given to elicit the writing. These students narrowed the topic or provided a focus in the piece. More often than not, a logical sequence was followed and relevant detail supplied where needed.

The papers in this category had few mistakes in spelling and in many cases explicit word choice enhanced the writing. Descriptive words were used, but figurative language often depended upon the demands of the task.

The better papers at all grade levels handled the conventions of language well. Few had difficulty with noun-verb argreement, and consistency in person was another strong point. When there was an error in punctuation, committee members felt that these students were often experimenting with more complex sentence structure and students' ability to punctuate simply had not kept pace with this development.

In contrast, the papers placed in the lowest grouping evidenced a definite weakness in organization. Paragraphing seemed absent to a large extent in this group of papers. The papers were either too short and lacked development, or they rambled on with no paragraph organization.

Although the topic development was weak, a surprisingly large number of even the weakest papers showed an attempt to adhere to the topic. Very few of the papers in the low category appeared focused, however, or provided relevant detail. The students who wrote these responses tended to list things whenever the task permitted this type of approach. Transitional expressions were practically non-existent.

The word choice in these papers was elementary. Few used descriptive words with effect, and explicit word choice was missing. Even though spelling was a problem, it did not appear to be as bad as one might expect.

The poor papers did have noun and verb agreement, but there was little variety in punctuation. Seventy-five percent of these writers did not use commas even when they should have been used.

Of course, this short account of this committee's work can not detail all of its findings or show the examples and charts used by the committee to support its findings. The committee's work moved the development of the test one step closer to completion.

After a thorough review by Bureau staff of this work, staff members developed five categories of writing types which it believed students in grade 5 could handle. (By this time the Department had reached the decision to assess writing abilities in Grade 5). These five categories included personal expression - reaction or feeling, personal narrative, process writing or how to do something, description, and a response to a story starter. In the summer of 1981, the test development committee began work on developing possible pretest items from these categories. In New York State all items used on examinations are pretested with students like those who will in fact take the test.

The committee developed 110 possible pretest items, and in the fall of 1981, the Steering Committee for the Elementary Writing Test met. Members of this committee represented the various community school-types found in New York State. The first meeting focused on the work done to this point, the types of writing to be expected from elementary school students, the make-up of the test, and a review of the pretest items already developed. As a result of this three-day meeting, 29 (narrowed from the 110) items were readied for pretesting in the schools of the state.

By February of 1982, 36 pretest items had been prepared. (Six had been added by staff.) Schools in the designed sample were contacted and agreed to do pretesting. As a result of the pretesting, we now had samples of students' writing for all 36 pretest items.

A committee of elementary teachers met in the Department to review the writing samples which resulted from this pretesting. The committee focused on the following: the success of the pretest item, differences in performance at the various grade levels, and the rating of the papers.

Bureau staff developed criteria to rate the papers holistically using a scale of 1-4 and a scale of 1-6. At this time, we tried to determine which scale would make the most sense to use with a statewide test and could teachers who were relatively unfamiliar with holistic scoring be trained to rate reliably and quickly. We found that the answer to the questions about training and reliability were definitely "yes".

The steering committee met in March 1982 and evaluated progress. The committee went through the training/rating process and concluded that a 1-4 scale should be used. The committee selected the "best" of the pretest items. As a result, we developed ten test forms to be field-tested. Each form included two writing tasks to be done by students.

The field testing took place in a selected sample of schools throughout the state. During this process, staff members observed the testing. They interviewed both teachers and students. In addition, teachers who tested but were not observed completed evaluation forms related to the test. These data were returned to the Department, including student responses to the test.

Our committee which had been involved in rating the pretest material rated these papers. Because we now had two writing samples from each student, we attempted to establish a rating procedure which could be introduced to teachers in the schools when the test became a reality. Criteria were established for a 1-4 scale with a special category for the zero paper. (See attached Criteria for Rating developed by Department staff.)

As with any evaluation of composition, there are likely to be differences of opinion even when a paper is graded holistically. The committee tried three resolution processes in order to solve the discrepancy problem. As a result of this work, staff developed a chart to use to solve the discrepancy problem. (See chart.)

Each step of the process which has taken three years has been an attempt to expand our knowledge about the young writer, what can be expected in a test situation, the evaluation process, and how to identify the student who needs instructional help to develop writing skills.

The Test

The Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools will be administered for the first time in May of 1983. The test will require two writing samples from each student who takes the test. The writing tasks will be taken from the five categories explained earlier in this article. The student will have no choice of tasks but must respond to both of those given. All students in grade 5 will be required to take the test except those who are exempted by the regulations governing the pupil evaluation program.

Teachers may read the directions and the tasks to the students. We recommend that each writing task be done on a separate day. We suggest that the writing be done for the test on consecutive days, but if that is not possible, certainly within a five day school period. We strongly urge that no student write the responses to both tasks on the same day. The time for the test will be an hour and 15 minutes to complete each piece of writing with more time given if needed.

Each task is set within a communication context when possible which means that purpose and audience have been established where appropriate. Drafting and revising are suggested to the student. Suggested length for student responses is 100-150 words, but this suggestion is made simply to aid the student as opposed to being one of the criteria to be used for evaluation.

Each test is to be rated at the local school by two different raters. As a result of this procedure, four scores will be obtained for each student's test. These four scores are to be summed and the result will be a scale which theoretically can range from 0-16. After the first administration of the test, that data will be studied and a statewide reference point will be established in order to indicate those students who need additional instruction in writing.

Training of Teachers to Rate the Test

Bureau staff with the aid of other Department units provided an indepth training session for fifty school personnel who represented geographically the entire state with the exception of New York City. After this training session, these participants served

CRITERIA FOR RATING STUDENT RESPONSES

LEVEL 4	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 1
Develops the assigned topic in an interesting and imaginative way	Develops the assigned topic in an acceptable but unimaginative way	Attempts to develop the assigned topic but includes digressions	Minimally addresses the assigned topic
Demonstrates a logical plan of organization and coherence in the development of ideas	Has a plan of organization and a satisfactory development of ideas	Demonstrates weakness in organization and the development of ideas	Shows lack of organization and development of ideas
Uses support material that is relevant and appropriate for the purpose and audience	Uses adequate support material	Uses little support material	Uses no support material or uses irrelevant material
Shows skillful use of sentence variety	Uses some sentence variety	Demonstrates sentence sense but has little sentence variety	Demonstrates a lack of sentence sense
Uses specific, vivid language	Uses appropriate language	Uses trite and/or imprecise language	Uses immature and/or inappropriate language
Makes few or no mechanical errors	Makes mechanical errors which do not interfere with communication	Makes mechanical errors which interfere with communication	Makes mechanical errors which seriously interfere with communication

Zero Paper

Is totally unrelated to the topic;
<u>or</u>
Is illegible; i.e., includes so many indecipherable words that no sense can be made of the response;
<u>or</u>
Is incoherent; i.e., words are legible but syntax is so garbled that the response makes no sense;
<u>or</u>
Is a blank paper.

METHOD FOR USING THIRD RATING
TO RESOLVE DISCREPANT SCORES

Steps:

a. Compare the three ratings.

b. If two of the three scores agree, drop the discrepant score.

c. If two of the scores are continguous, drop the most discrepant score.

d. If the third rating is the middle score, double the third rating and drop the two divergent scores.

Examples:

Rater 1	Rater 2	Rater 3	Resolved scores for response	Reasons
1	3	If 1, then	1/1	Agreement (2 of the 3 scores agree, discrepant score dropped)
		If 2, then	2/2	Middle score (Score between divergent scores doubled, divergent scores dropped)
		If 3, then	3/3	Agreement (2 of the 3 scores agree, discrepant score dropped)
		If 4, then	3/4	Continguous (2 nearest scores used, most discrepant score dropped)
1	4	If 1, then	1/1	Agreement
		If 2, then	1/2	Continguous
		If 3, then	3/4	Continguous
		If 4, then	4/4	Agreement
0	1	If 0, then	0/0	Agreement
		If 1, then	1/1	Agreement (drop zero score)
		If 2, then	1/2	Continguous (drop zero score)
		If 3 or 4, then to fourth rater		

If the fourth rating is 1-4, drop the zero score and use the chart above. If the fourth rating is a zero, at least two of the raters, one who gave it a zero and one who gave it a score of 1-4, should review the criteria for the zero paper and reach consensus as to whether it is a zero paper or not. Proceed using the chart above, if necessary.

as turnkey trainers who returned to their geographic area and trained all fifth grade teachers in the New York State elementary schools. By the time the test is given in May of 1983 all teachers who will be expected to rate student papers will have been trained in the method required by the Education Department.

Representatives from the 30+ school districts in New York City, plus representative staff from the central board, and personnel from non-public schools also received similar indepth training and returned to their schools and conducted training for fifth grade teachers.

Work to Complete

One more field testing will be done prior to January 1983 to determine the feasibility of including a prewriting activity in the testing situation. A procedure to be used by the teacher with the students to get them ready to write has been developed. If this prewriting segment causes no difficulties and it appears that students perform better as a result of it, the prewriting will become a part of the test.

The first year of the test administration will be a year in which further study will continue by the Department in order to obtain valuable information about students' performance, teachers' perceptions of the test, students' reaction to the tasks, an indication of the number of students taking the test and how they scored on the 0 - 16 scale. The Department will study the reliability of rating and the possible use of range finders. A thorough review of student performance on each task will be done.

Test Implications

Undoubtedly the Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools will have an impact on several aspects of education. Hopefully writing will be seen as an integral part of instruction and classroom practice throughout the elementary grades, and that the emphasis should be on the total writing process which results in whole pieces of discourse.

With assessment at both the elementary and secondary levels, schools should move toward an articulated K-12 program with writing folders kept across the grades. Even before the test becomes a reality, teachers will have received training in a technique to evaluate student writing. Even if the program were to go no further, 17,000 elementary teachers are now talking about ways to rate compositions and the reasons for giving ratings.

The focus on writing should bring an awareness to school personnel -- teacher and administrator -- that they need to know more about the writing process -- and that what we know today, we did not know ten years ago.

Teacherswill also have an additional means to identify student needs. Students who may need help to develop their writing abilities should now be guaranteed that help.

Of course, no program is without pitfalls. Tests, whether they come from a state agency or a commercial firm, can limit the instructional program. Hopefully this test and the materials which accompany it will not have such an effect in New York State.